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RICHARD K. MORGAN • GORAN PARLOV • BILL SIENKIEWICZ
BLACK WIDOW
LAND
Ryan
J-Po

Right to a Life: Part 2

Previously:
The Black Widow. Russian intelligence agent, KGB-recruited. A Soviet weapon of the Cold War. Legend of the covert Moscow espionage academy known as the Red Room. Later, a defector to the U.S. and a freelance agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.

Now, retired and living in Arizona, where her days consist of rock-climbing and reading books banned under the old Communist regime. At long last, Natasha Romanova has finally gotten out of the spy game.

But a sudden string of global killings threatens to lure her back in. The murders seem unconnected on the surface. Except…all of the victims are women. And Natasha's next on the list.

When an old-school assassin comes calling, she knows she's in trouble. She survives the attack and seeks help from Phil Dexter, an old ally from her S.H.I.E.L.D. days.

Phil has intel on the other murders. Turns out one of the victims was a former KGB deep-cover operative. Stacy Matheson, a.k.a. Stefanya Melnikova, was living out her days as a women's rights activist in Alabama, where she was shot protesting outside a family planning clinic.

Natasha and Phil journey to Alabama to investigate the truth behind her death.

Meanwhile, the mysterious man who hired Natasha's would-be killer brings in two new operatives from an organization called North. They track her abandoned car to New Mexico -- and find it rigged with explosives.

Richard K. Morgan
WRITER

Goran Parlov
LAYOUTS

Bill Sienkiewicz
FINISHES

Dan Brown
COLORIST

Chris Eliopoulos
LETTERER

Greg Land and Matt Ryan
COVER

Jennifer Lee
EDITOR

Axel Alonso
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Joe Quesada
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Dan Buckley
PUBLISHER

Russian translation provided by Maggie Payne and Jennifer Grünwald

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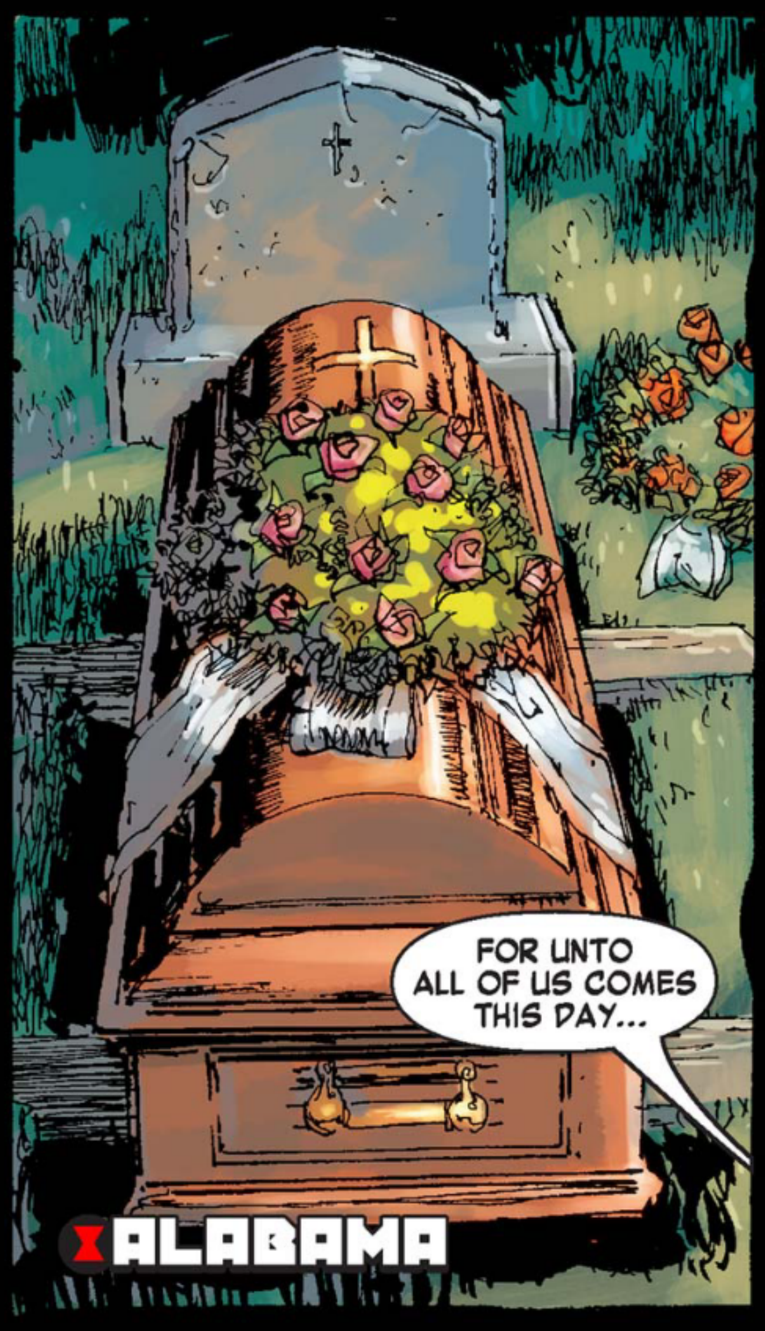
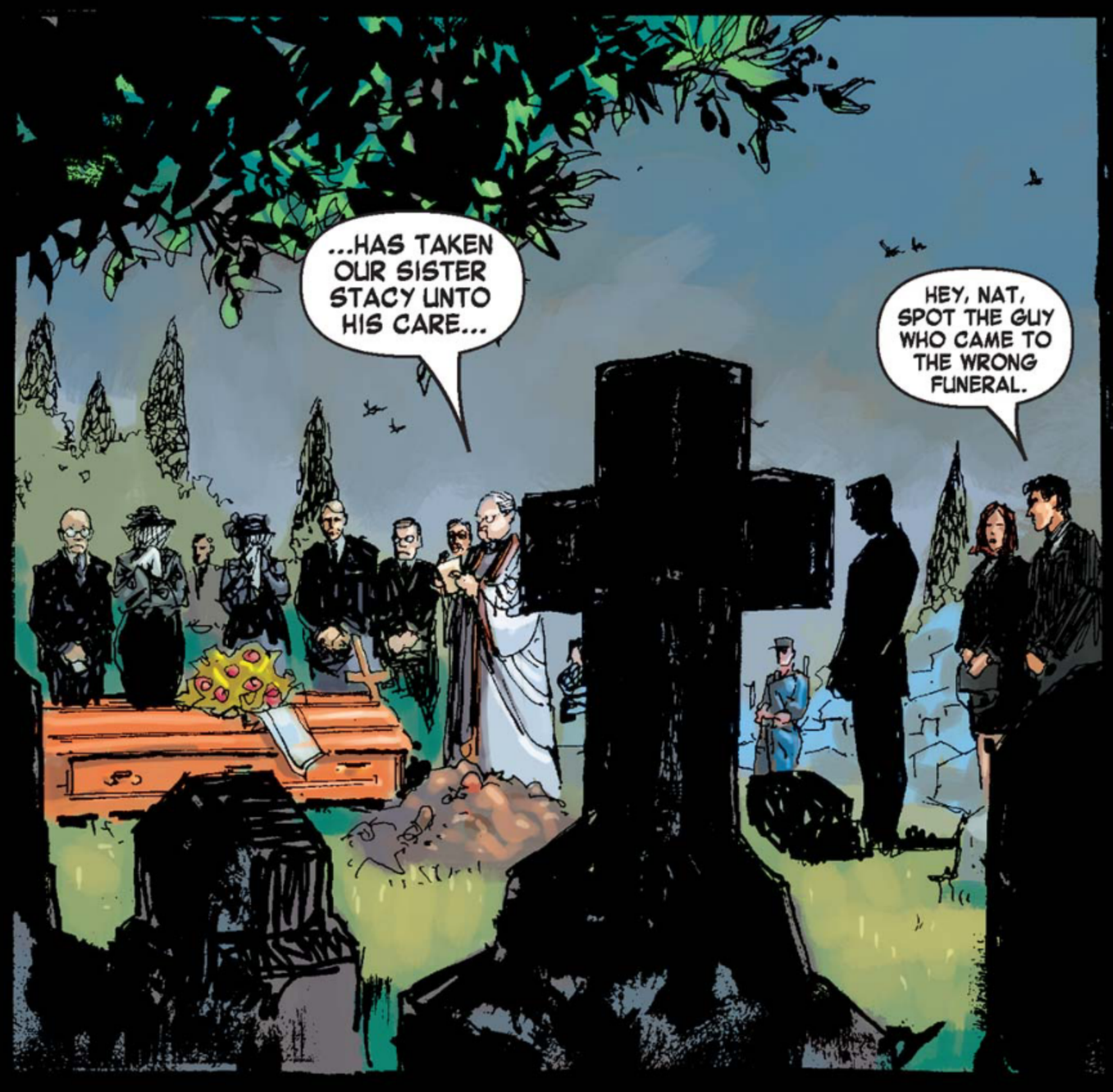

FOR UNTO ALL OF US COMES THIS DAY...
X ALABAMA


...HAS TAKEN OUR SISTER STACY UNTO HIS CARE...
HEY, NAT, SPOT THE GUY WHO CAME TO THE WRONG FUNERAL.

OR *NOT*. WHEN THIS BREAKS UP, YOU FOLLOW HIM. TAKE THE RENTAL CAR. I'LL SEE YOU BACK AT THE HOTEL.

EXCUSE ME...

OH. AHEM

UH, ARE YOU FROM--

NADINE ROMAN. I KNEW STACY FROM HER SLAVONIC STUDIES CLASS.
OH, YES. ACTUALLY, I DON'T REMEMBER HER TELLING ME ABOUT THAT, BUT WE WERE, YOU KNOW, JUST GOOD FRIENDS, NOTHING MORE THAN THAT, UH...

ARE YOU COMING BACK FOR THE--
I WAS, BUT MY RIDE JUST LEFT...
BECAUSE I COULD, YOU KNOW, GIVE YOU A LIFT, IF--

THAT'S VERY KIND, AH...

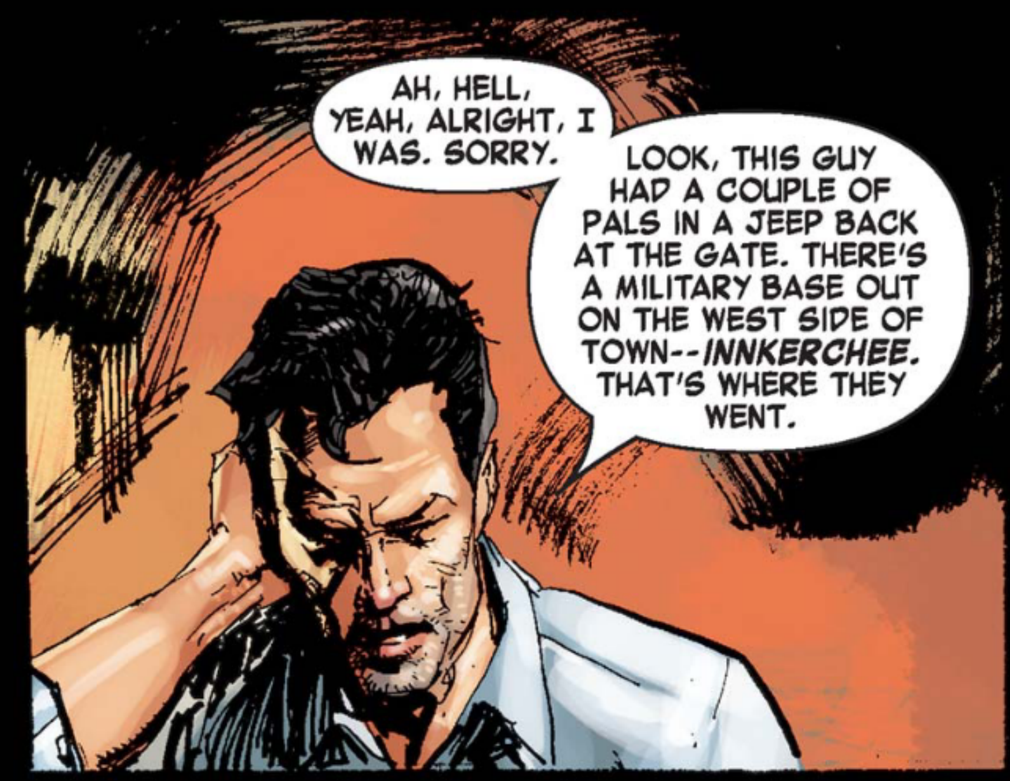
BRAD. BRAD SCHOFIELD.
NADINE.
NADINE. RIGHT. TH-THAT'S A LOVELY NAME...

AFTER THAT IT WAS PRETTY EASY. AND YOU WANT TO HEAR A BIG SECRET? IT SEEMS OUR STACY WAS NEARLY THREE MONTHS PREGNANT WHEN SHE GOT SHOT.
IRONIC, HUH? IF THE PRO-LIFERS GOT HER, I MEAN?
AND IF IT WAS SOMEONE ELSE?

THEN JUST UNLUCKY. I GOT HER ADDRESS FROM THIS GUY BRAD. WE SHOULD GO OUT THERE TONIGHT AND TAKE A LOOK.
SURE, IF YOU AND YOUNG BRAD DON'T HAVE OTHER PLANS.

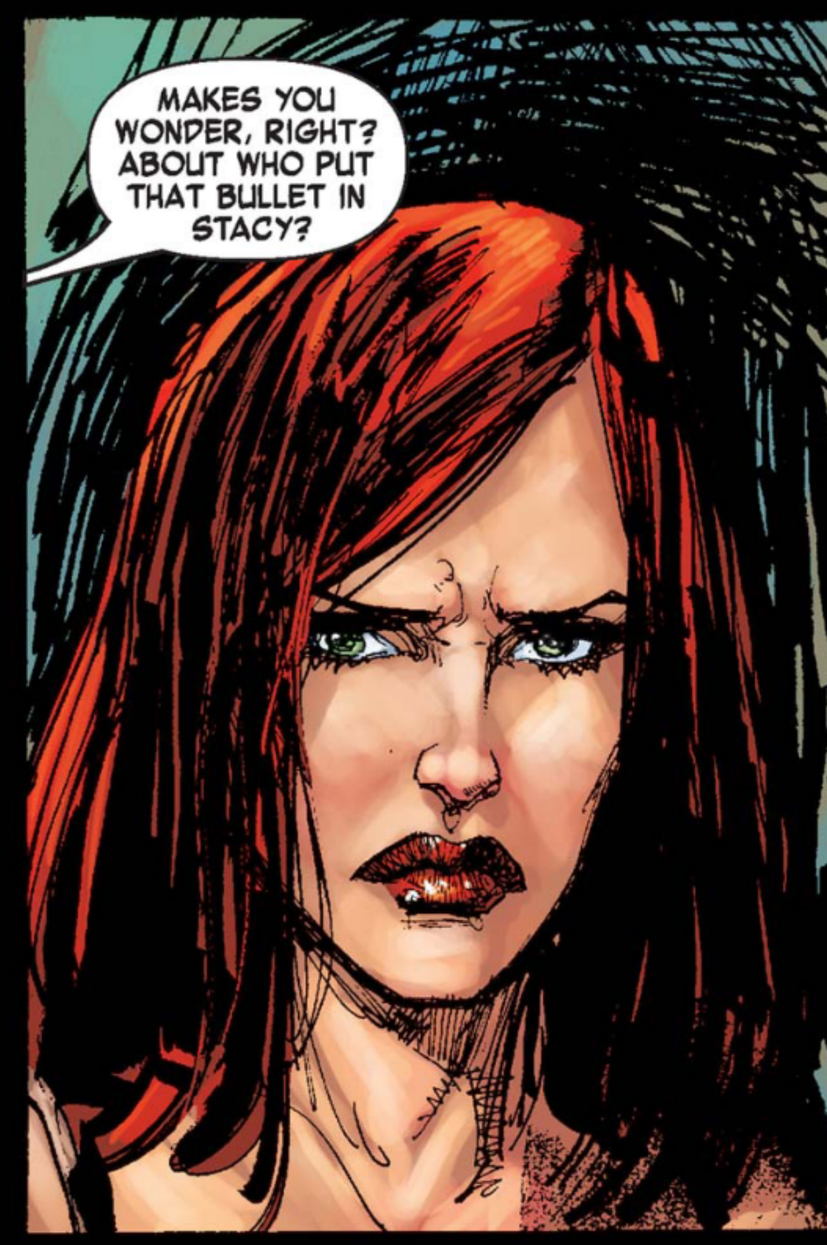
HA. SO TELL ME ABOUT OUR SOLDIER BOY.
AND STOP LOOKING AT MY ASS.

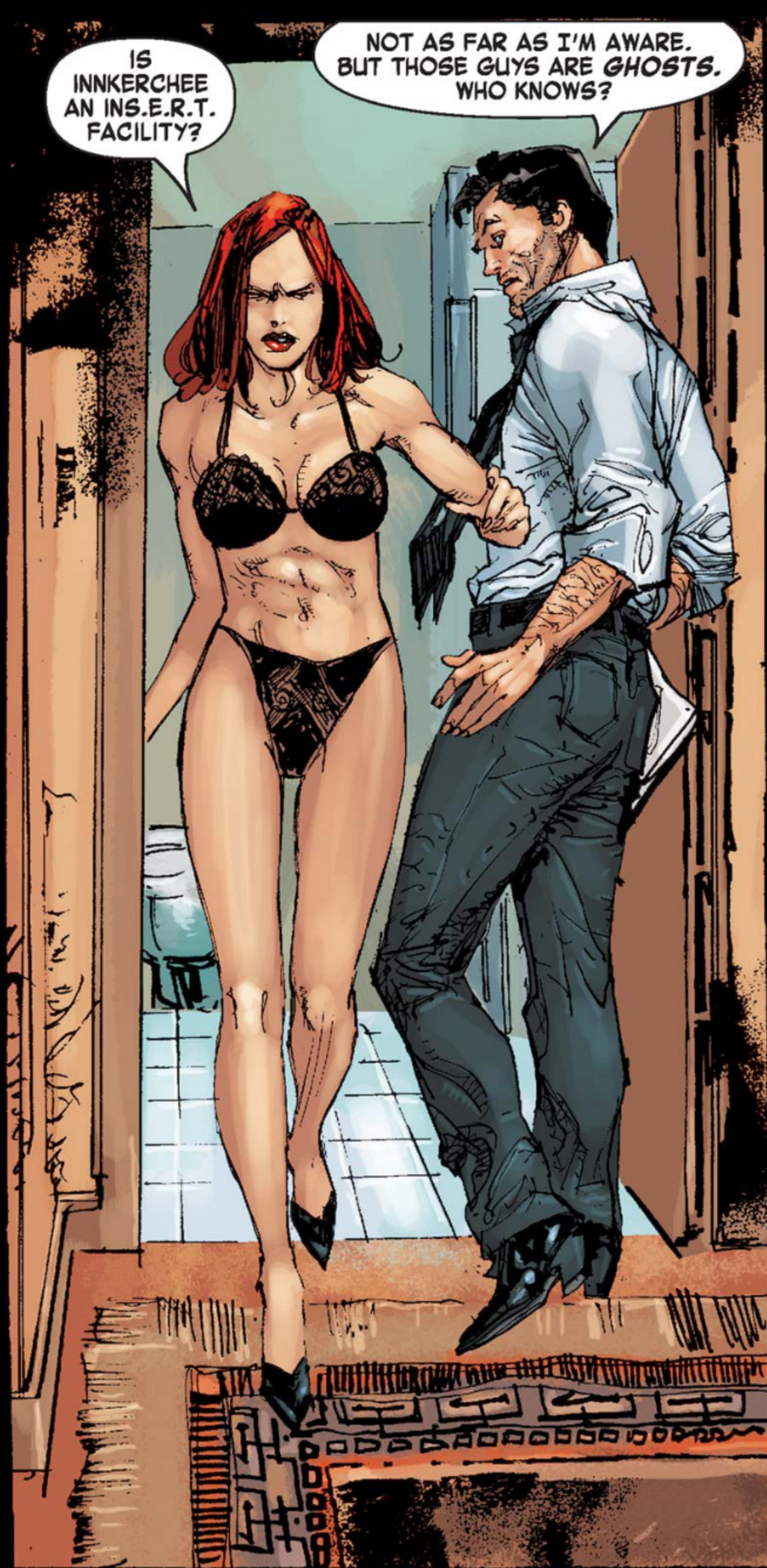
WHAT? I WASN'T--


AH, HELL, YEAH, ALRIGHT, I WAS. SORRY.
LOOK, THIS GUY HAD A COUPLE OF PALS IN A JEEP BACK AT THE GATE. THERE'S A MILITARY BASE OUT ON THE WEST SIDE OF TOWN--INNKERCHEE. THAT'S WHERE THEY WENT.

I GOT PHOTOS, SCANNED THEM INTO THE LAPTOP AND RAN THEM BY A FRIEND IN WASHINGTON. THIS IS WHAT I GOT BACK.
VERY PRETTY. AND THAT'S INS.E.R.T. INSIGNIA, ISN'T IT?

YEAH. SERGEANT WILL FORESTER, SECONDED TO INS.E.R.T. CORPS FROM REGULAR FORCES TWO YEARS AGO. STILL WITH THEM AS FAR AS I CAN WORK OUT.
INS.E.R.T. INSURGENCY, EXTRACTION, RECONNAISSANCE--
--AND TERMINATION. YEAH.


MAKES YOU WONDER, RIGHT? ABOUT WHO PUT THAT BULLET IN STACY?


IS INNKERCHEE AN INS.E.R.T. FACILITY?
NOT AS FAR AS I'M AWARE. BUT THOSE GUYS ARE GHOSTS. WHO KNOWS?

WELL, HE SEEMED PRETTY UPSET AT THE FUNERAL.
SO HE'S THE SENSITIVE TYPE. YOU KNOW, WEEPS EVERY TIME HE HAS TO KILL SOME EX-SOVIET SPY. MAYBE IT'S NOT A GOOD IDEA FOR YOU TO STICK AROUND.

OR MAYBE SOME PRO-LIFE NUT GOT HER AFTER ALL. EITHER WAY, I'M NOT LEAVING UNTIL I HAVE SOME ANSWERS.
WE'RE GOING TO STACY'S PLACE. NOW.

ROT IN HELL BABY KILLER!

YOU THINK YOU COULD HAVE *CHANGED* FOR THIS?
HEY, NAT, FUNERALS, BURGLARY--IT'S AN *ALL-PURPOSE BLACK.*
ANYWAY, SPEAKING OF *DRESS,* WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THOSE *STINGER BRACELETS* YOU WERE SO FAMOUS FOR?

PHIL, YOU EVER TRY CARRYING *FOUR KILOS* OF HI-TECH HARDWARE WRAPPED AROUND EACH WRIST?
DIDN'T THINK SO.
CLICK

"HEAVY, AWKWARD, *ALWAYS* GETTING IN THE WAY. IN MOSCOW ONCE, I DAMN NEAR SHOT *MY OWN HAND* OFF.

"PLUS THEY WERE *WARSAW PACT* ISSUE AND YOU NEVER COULD GET THE REPLACEMENT PARTS IN THE U.S.

"AND THEY WERE ALWAYS BREAKING DOWN. SO ONE DAY--

"--I TOOK THEM OFF--"

--AND JUST NEVER PUT THEM BACK ON AGAIN.

CLICK

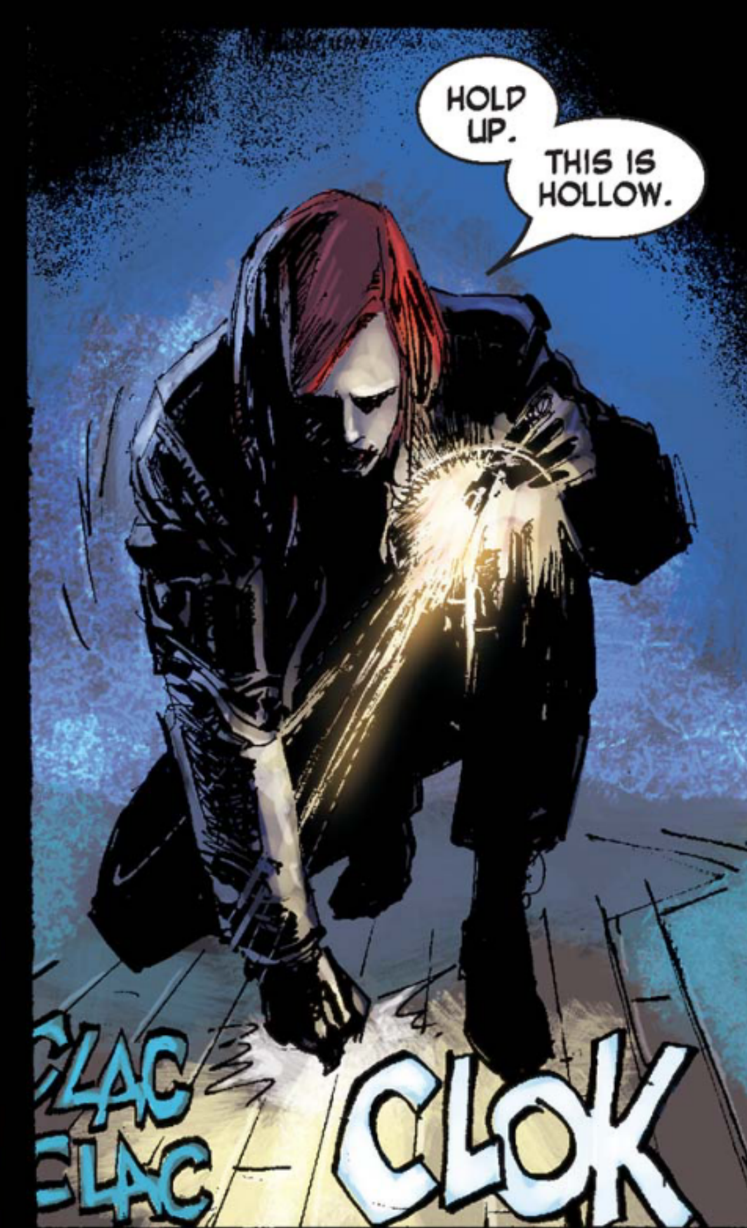
YOU COMING IN?

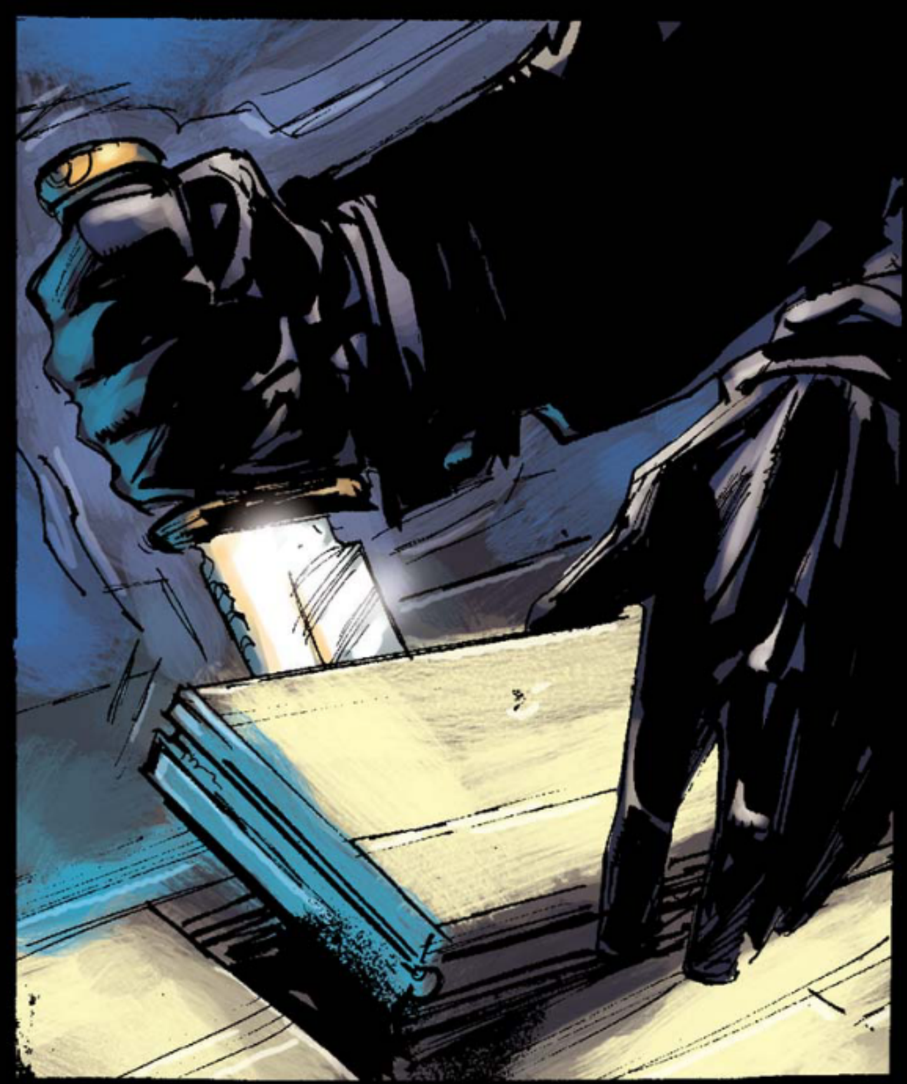
NAT, WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR, EXACTLY?
NO IDEA.
BUT LET ME KNOW IF YOU SEE IT.
HELPFUL, THANKS.

HI, YOU'VE REACHED STACY MATHESON. PLEASE LEAVE A MESSAGE, UNLESS OF COURSE YOU'RE CALLING TO DAMN ME TO HELL FOR ALL ETERNITY, IN WHICH CASE, YOU CAN JUST DROP DEAD...→BEEP←

POLICE MUST HAVE TAKEN THE MESSAGE TAPE FOR EVIDENCE.
OR SOMEONE ELSE DID.

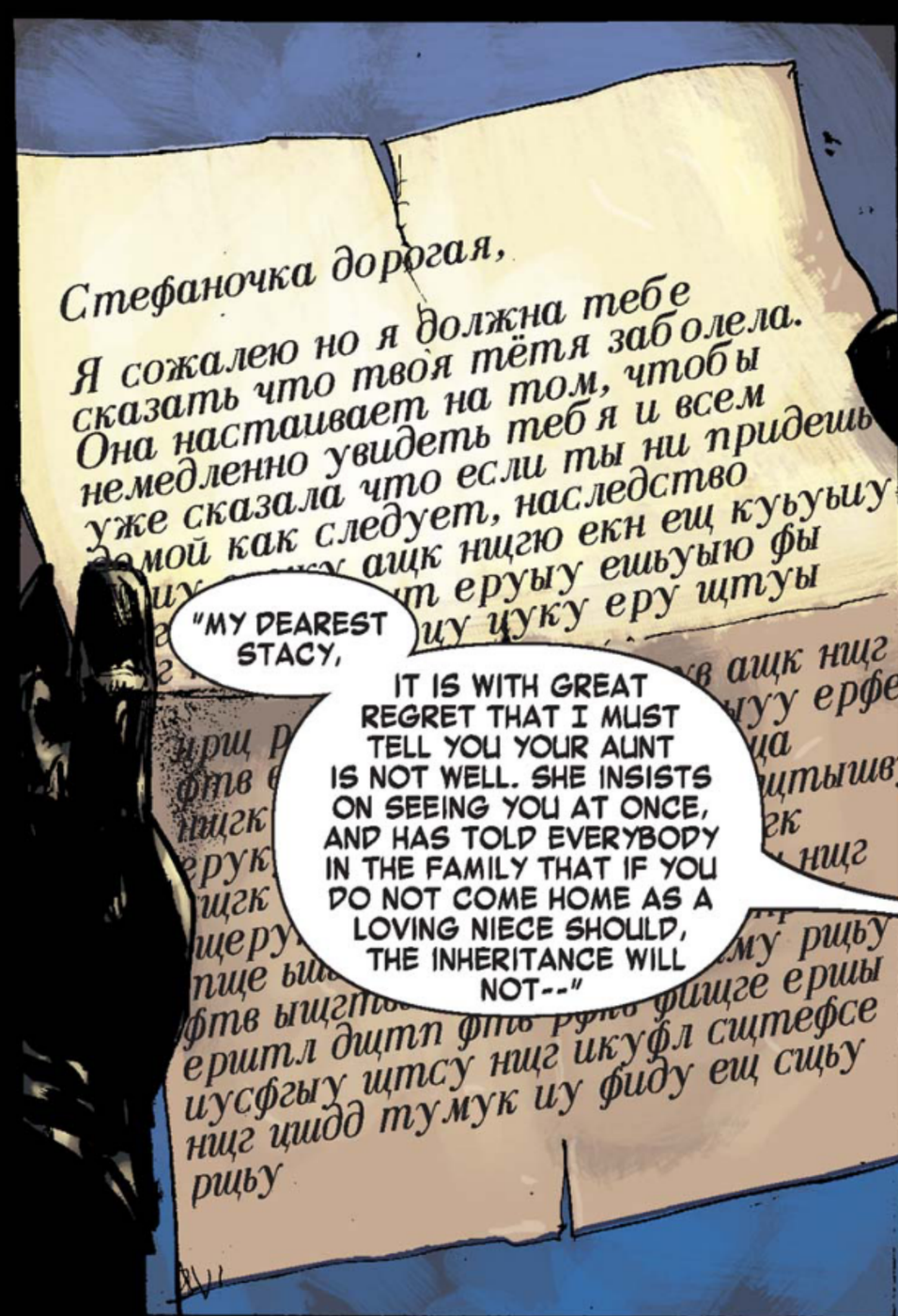
PARANOID.
YEAH, I KEEP THINKING SOMEONE'S TRYING TO KILL ME.
CREAAAK


HOLD UP.
THIS IS HOLLOW.
CLAC
CLAC
CLOK



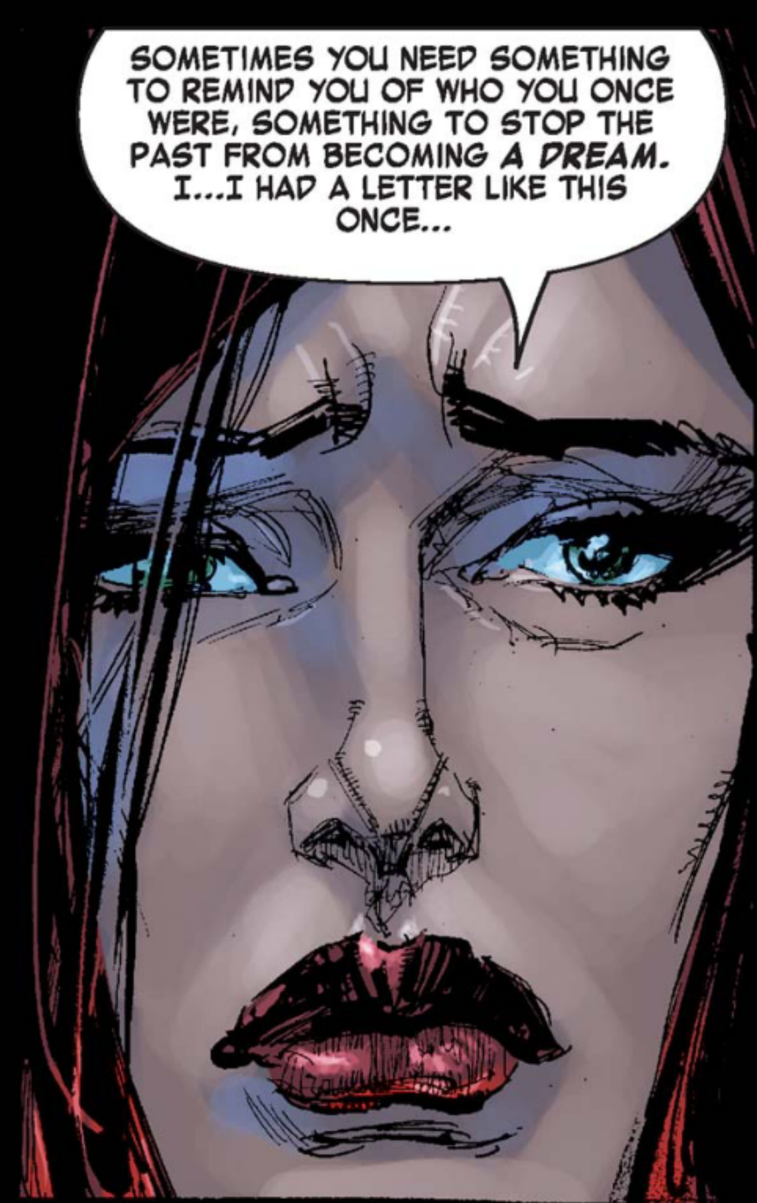
TWENTY
Стефаночка

UNCLE ILYA.
SAY WHAT?


Стефаночка дорогая,
Я сожалею но я должна тебе сказать что твоя тётя заболела. Она настаивает на том, чтобы немедленно увидеть тебя и всем уже сказала что если ты ни придешь домой как следует, наследство
"MY DEAREST STACY,
IT IS WITH GREAT REGRET THAT I MUST TELL YOU YOUR AUNT IS NOT WELL. SHE INSISTS ON SEEING YOU AT ONCE, AND HAS TOLD EVERYBODY IN THE FAMILY THAT IF YOU DO NOT COME HOME AS A LOVING NIECE SHOULD, THE INHERITANCE WILL NOT--"

AND UNCLE ILYA IS...?
IT'S A CODE NAME FOR HER KGB CONTROLLER. HE'S TELLING HER THAT SHE HAS TO *MAKE A CHOICE:*
COME HOME TO MOSCOW FOR *FINAL DEBRIEFING,* OR BE CUT LOOSE FROM KGB PROTECTION FOREVER AND TAKE HER CHANCES HERE IN THE WEST.

THIS MUST BE FROM SOME TIME IN 1990, '91, AFTER THE BERLIN WALL CAME DOWN. THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN TRYING TO PULL ALL THE DEEP COVER AGENTS OUT QUICKLY BEFORE *GORBACHEV* ORDERED THE WHOLE OPERATION SHUT DOWN.
SHE MUST HAVE DECIDED--
--TO STAY, YEAH, YEAH. HAVE A SHOT AT *REAL LIFE* IN THE *LAND OF THE FREE,* I CAN SEE THAT. BUT WHY WOULD SHE KEEP SOMETHING LIKE THIS FOR ALL THESE YEARS?


SOMETIMES YOU NEED SOMETHING TO REMIND YOU OF WHO YOU ONCE WERE, SOMETHING TO STOP THE PAST FROM BECOMING *A DREAM.* I...I HAD A LETTER LIKE THIS ONCE...

RIGHT, LOOK, I'LL JUST GIVE YOU A MOMENT ON MEMORY LANE, OKAY?
ELEVEN, TWELVE, THIRTEEN-- MAN, THIS JUSTS GETS BETTER AND BETTER....

SO HOW MUCH WAS THERE?
AGH!!!
HOW MUCH HAVE YOU *STOLEN* FROM STEFANYA MELNIKOVA?

WHAT? I'M NOT--
LOOK, IT'S NOT LIKE SHE'S GOING TO *NEED IT* WHERE SHE--

OKAY. ABOUT *SEVENTEEN GRAND.*
IN CASE YOU HAVEN'T NOTICED, WE'VE INCURRED A FEW MINOR EXPENSES RECENTLY AND--
HEY! STOP LOOKING AT *MY* ASS, WILLYA?

DON'T FLATTER YOURSELF, PHIL.
LOOK AT THIS.

MEDUSAGEN...? SOUNDS LIKE A *HORMONE.*
YEAH, A *REALLY NASTY* ONE. YOU SEEN IT BEFORE?

NO. BUT THESE I *DO* RECOGNIZE. YOU?
PHENO--I CAN'T EVEN *PRONOUNCE* THAT. PAINKILLERS?

MILITARY-ISSUE PAINKILLERS. VERY POWERFUL, VERY DIFFICULT TO GET HOLD OF OUTSIDE OF MILITARY CIRCLES.
UNLESS YOU'VE GOT SOMEONE INSIDE WITH A VESTED INTEREST IN YOUR WELL-BEING.

OR MAYBE A PATERNAL INTEREST. SHE WAS PREGNANT, REMEMBER.

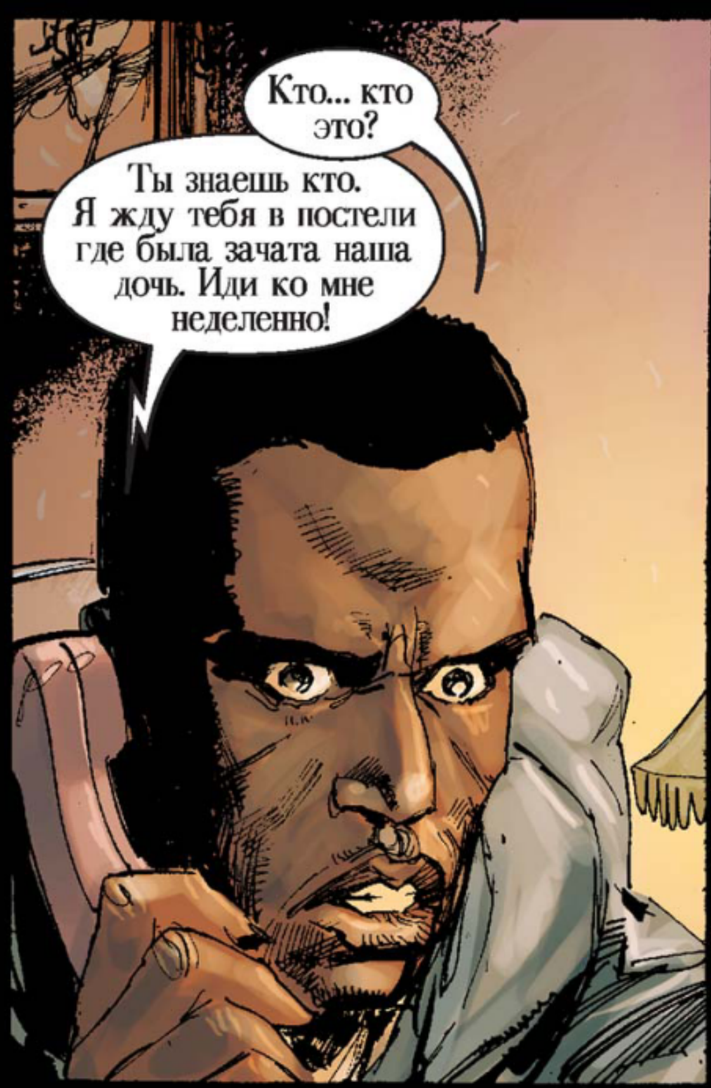
INNKERCHEE DUTY OFFICER.
YES, I'D LIKE TO SPEAK TO SERGEANT WILLIAM FORESTER IMMEDIATELY.

I DON'T BELIEVE THAT WILL BE POSSIBLE AT THIS HOUR--
SON, THIS IS COLONEL ULYSSES CATHCART OF INS.E.R.T. COMMAND, WASHINGTON, COMMAND CLEARANCE AZURE. NOW, WHAT I DON'T BELIEVE IS THAT YOU THINK SERGEANT FORESTER'S SLEEP PATTERNS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN NATIONAL SECURITY...

...OR DO YOU, SON?
UH, NO SIR!!!
GOOD, THEN WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER. NOW YOU BUZZ SERGEANT FORESTER RIGHT AWAY.

YOU KNOW, I REALLY HOPE OLD CATHCART IS STILL RUNNING OFF CLEARANCE AZURE. HOPE HE'S STILL AT INS.E.R.T., TOO, BECAUSE IF NOT--
THIS IS FORESTER.

Отец моего ребёнка, что ты сделал?


Кто... кто это?
Ты знаешь кто. Я жду тебя в постели где была зачата наша дочь. Иди ко мне неделенно!

AND THAT WAS?
BAIT. COME ON, WE NEED TO FIND YOU A HIDING PLACE.

YOU THINK HE'S GOING TO COME HERE? RIGHT NOW?
HE'S CONFUSED AND UPSET. HE'S JUST HEARD A WOMAN'S VOICE IN RUSSIAN CALLING OUT FOR HIM...

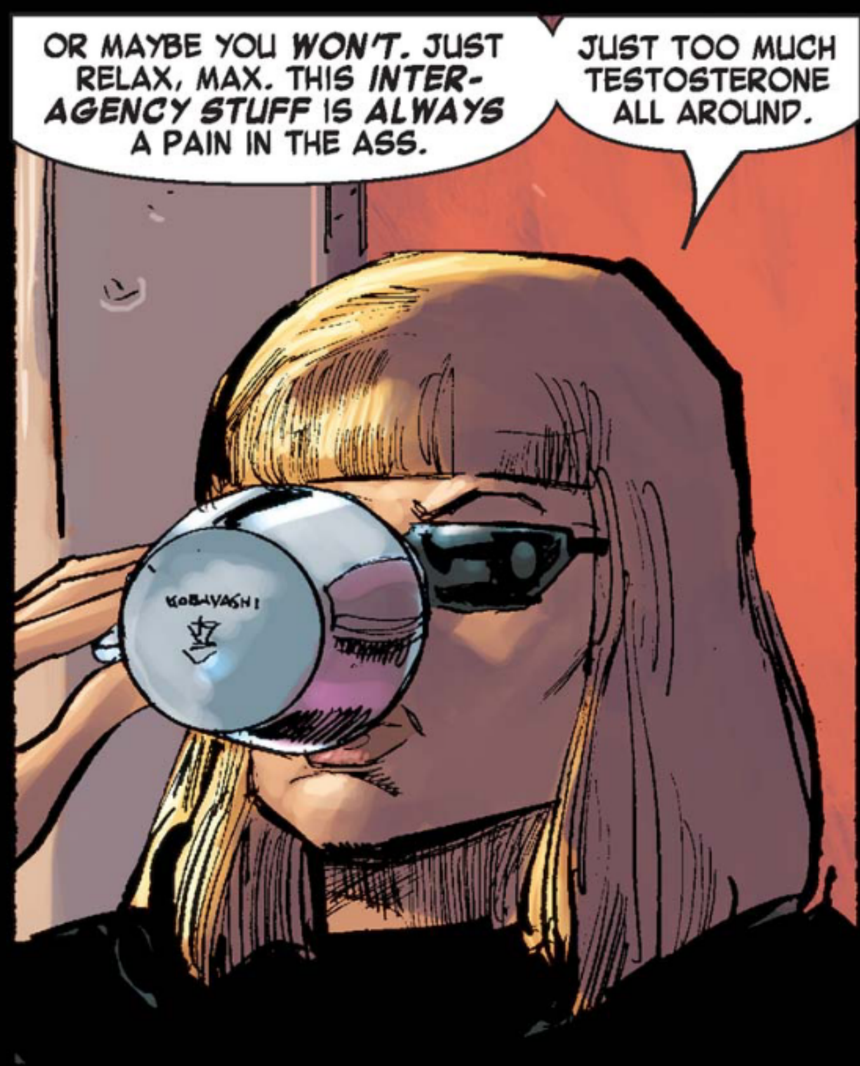
...AND I DIDN'T THINK THAT WAS SUCH A BAD STACY IMPRESSION, DID YOU?

ALLOW ME TO APPLAUD YOUR MULTIPLE TALENTS FOR MANIPULATION AND DECEIT.
I'M A SPY. WAS A SPY.
YOU USE WHATEVER KEEPS YOU AHEAD OF THE OPPOSITION.

WELL, SOMEONE AROUND HERE IS HELPING HER, SHERIFF. SOMEONE WITH A HISTORY, SO I SUGGEST YOU KEEP LOOKING UNTIL YOU DIG THAT HISTORY UP!
Santa Fe Dominion Hotel
X NEW MEXICO

SOMETHING'S WRONG HERE, KESTREL. IT'S ALL TOO CLEAN. NO TRACES, NOTHING TO GET A GRIP ON.
YOU THINK SHE WENT TO ANOTHER SLEEPER FOR HELP? ANOTHER DEEP COVER?

YEAH. OR WITH THE BODY SHE'S GOT, MAYBE SOME GUY SHE'S GOT HOOKS IN FROM THE OLD S.H.I.E.L.D. DAYS. THEY'RE USUALLY BURIED PRETTY DEEP, TOO.
IF THAT'S THE CASE, FURY WOULD KNOW.
YEAH, BUT THERE'S NO REASON ON EARTH HE'D FEEL THE NEED TO SHARE IT WITH US. HE'S BARELY COOPERATING AS IT IS.
MAYBE I'LL JUST GO UP TO WASHINGTON AND KICK IT OUT OF HIM.

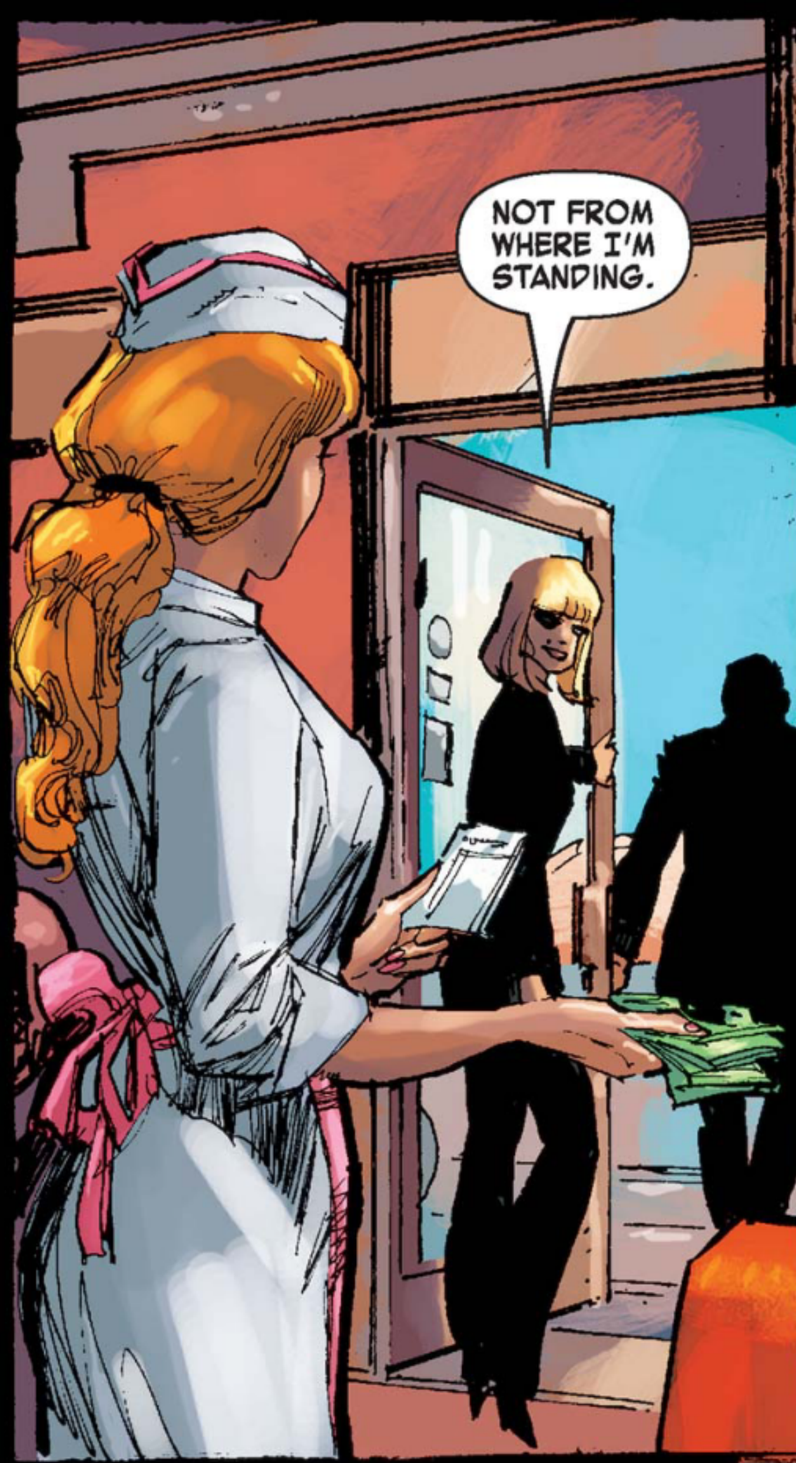

OR MAYBE YOU *WON'T.* JUST RELAX, MAX. THIS *INTER-AGENCY STUFF* IS *ALWAYS* A PAIN IN THE ASS.
JUST TOO MUCH TESTOSTERONE ALL AROUND.

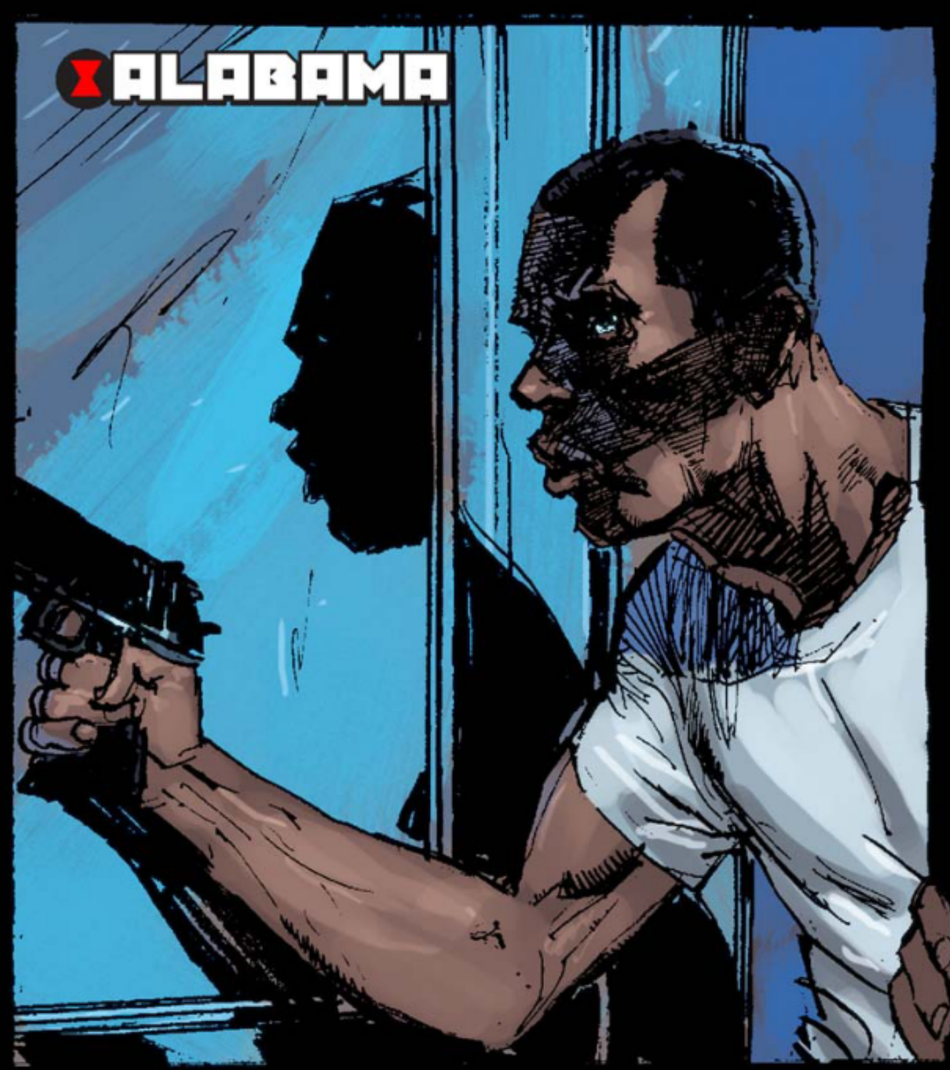
YEAH, WELL YOU *WOULD* SAY THAT.
DOESN'T SEEM TO *STOP* YOU WORKING FOR *NORTH* THOUGH.
HEY, *NORTH* PAYS *TWICE MY C.I.A. DAY RATE.* I'D BE A FOOL TO--
QUEEEP

YES, THIS IS MAX HUNTER. TELL ME SOMETHING I WANT TO HEAR, WHY DON'T YOU?

UNDERSTOOD, CAPTAIN. YES, I DO THINK IT'S OF NOTE, TAKE YOUR TEAM AND GET AFTER THE FATHER *IMMEDIATELY.*
AND IF HE LOOKS LIKE HE'S TALKING TO THE *WRONG PEOPLE,* YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO.

THE WIDOW'S NOT HERE. WE'RE IN THE *WRONG STATE,* KESTREL.


NOT FROM WHERE I'M STANDING.


ALABAMA

STACY...?

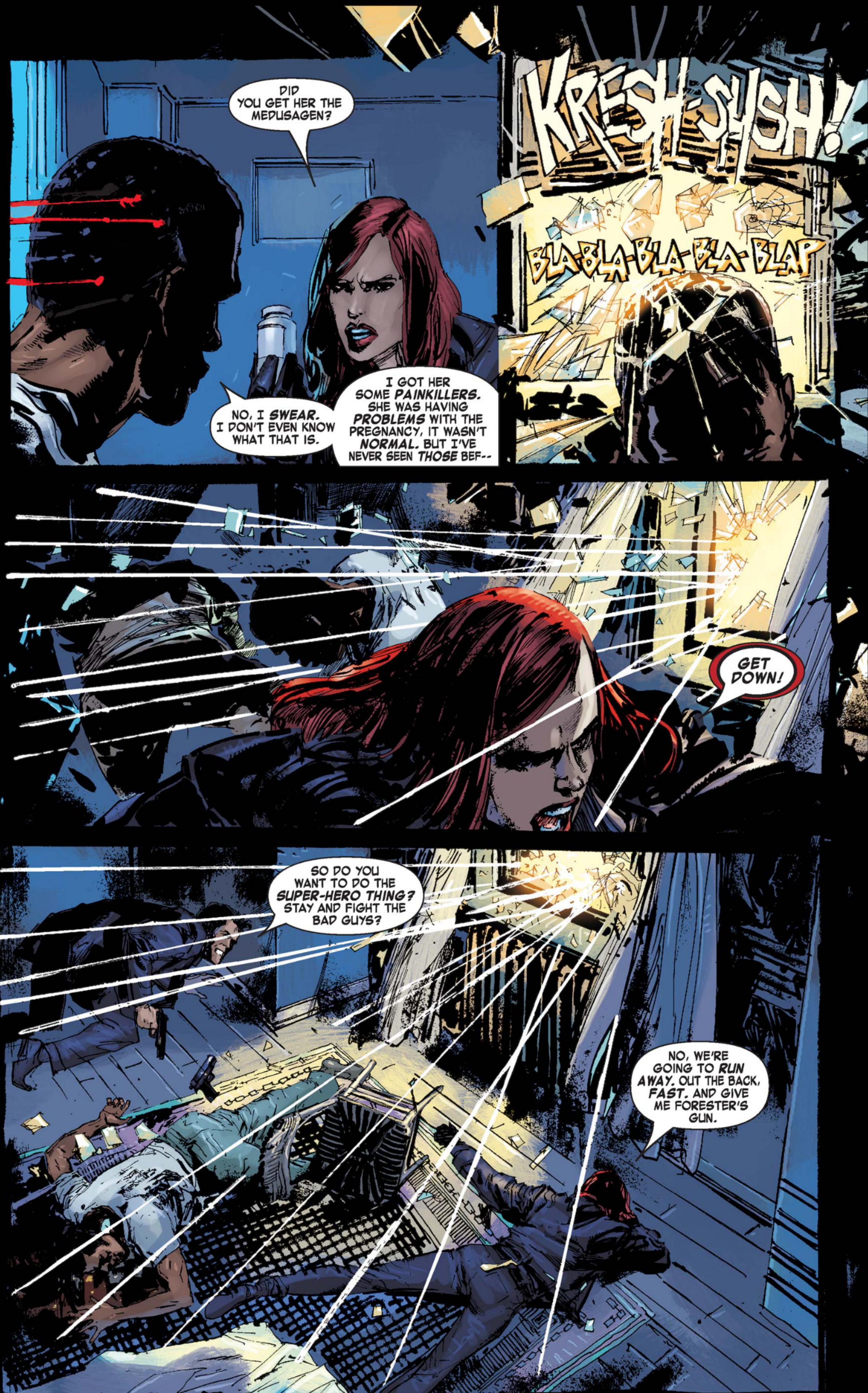
...IS THAT Y-- AAAAGH!!

NOT QUITE. BUT I KNOW WHO YOU ARE, WILL FORESTER.

GET BACK, GET BACK OR I'LL--

SPARE US THE DRAMATICS, WILL. HAVE A SEAT.

WHO ARE YOU PEOPLE?
I'M A FRIEND OF STACY'S. LOOKING OUT FOR HER INTERESTS, YOU COULD SAY.
STACY'S DEAD.
YEAH, WE SAW HER GO INTO THE HOLE, PAL, TELL US SOMETHING WE DON'T KNOW. LIKE DID YOU GIVE HER THESE PILLS?
I'M NOT TELLING YOU A DAMN THING.
WILL, WE ALL KNOW THE PRO-LIFERS DIDN'T REALLY SHOOT STACY. IT WAS A PROFESSIONAL JOB, VERY COMPETENT.
AND WHOEVER DID IT IS GOING TO COME LOOKING FOR THE FATHER OF STACY'S UNBORN CHILD.
IT WAS YOU ON THE PHONE? SPEAKING RUSSIAN?
THAT'S RIGHT. LIKE I SAID, I'M A FRIEND--FROM THE OLD DAYS. STACY'S TOLD YOU ABOUT THAT, RIGHT?
I KNOW WHAT SHE USED TO BE. SHE TOLD ME, BUT I DIDN'T CARE. I WAS CRAZY ABOUT HER. I WOULD HAVE QUIT THE MILITARY SOONER THAN LOSE HER.


DID YOU GET HER THE MEDUSAGEN?
NO, I SWEAR. I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT THAT IS.
I GOT HER SOME PAINKILLERS. SHE WAS HAVING PROBLEMS WITH THE PREGNANCY, IT WASN'T NORMAL. BUT I'VE NEVER SEEN THOSE BEF--
KRESH-SYSH!
BLA-BLA-BLA-BLA-BLAP
GET DOWN!
SO DO YOU WANT TO DO THE SUPER-HERO THING? STAY AND FIGHT THE BAD GUYS?
NO, WE'RE GOING TO RUN AWAY. OUT THE BACK, FAST. AND GIVE ME FORESTER'S GUN.

KRACK!!!
BLA-BLA-BLA-BLA-BLAP!!!
BLA-BLA-BLAP!
BLA-BLA-BLAP! BLAP!
NOT GOOD, NAT. THEY'RE OUT BACK, TOO.

THEN LET ME GO FIRST.
BLA-BLA-BLA-BLA-BLA-BLA-BLA BLABLAPP
THAT'S IT, BOYS. SHOW ME WHERE YOU ARE.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!
AAAGH!
LET'S GO, PHIL!!
FLUP!
FLUP!
FLUP!
YAAAAA!
BLA-BLAP! BLAP! BLA-BLAP!

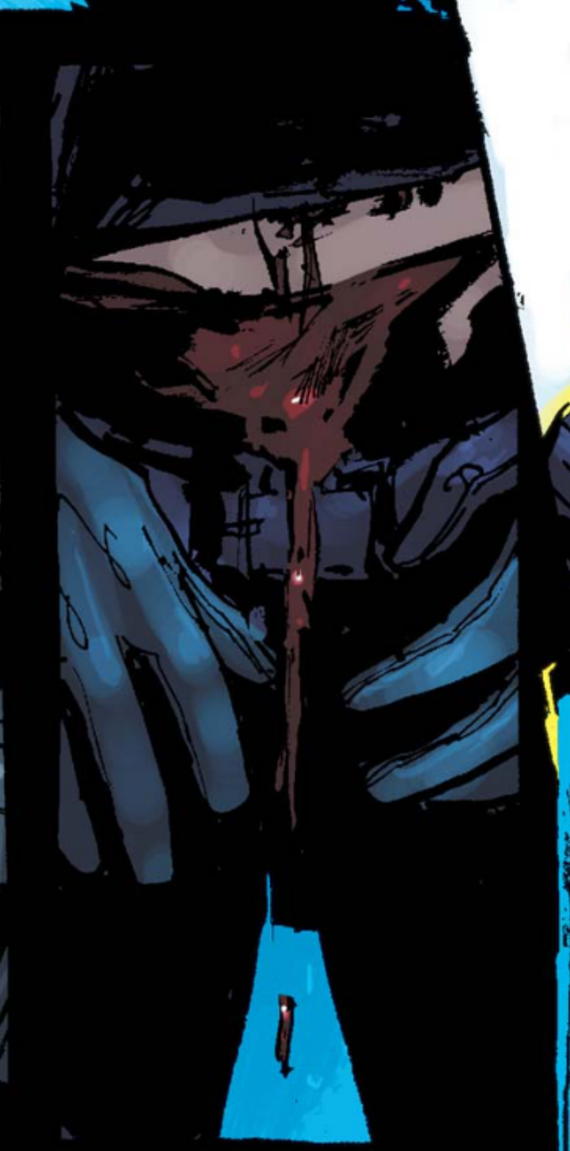
GENERALLY, I DON'T LIKE GUNS. TOO MUCH NOISE...
AIEEEGH!!
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAP BLAP
YOU HAVE TO RELOAD...
CLIK CLIK CLIK
CH
KRAK!
BLA BLA BLAP
AND THEY'RE MORE THAN A LITTLE SYMBOLICALLY SUSPECT...

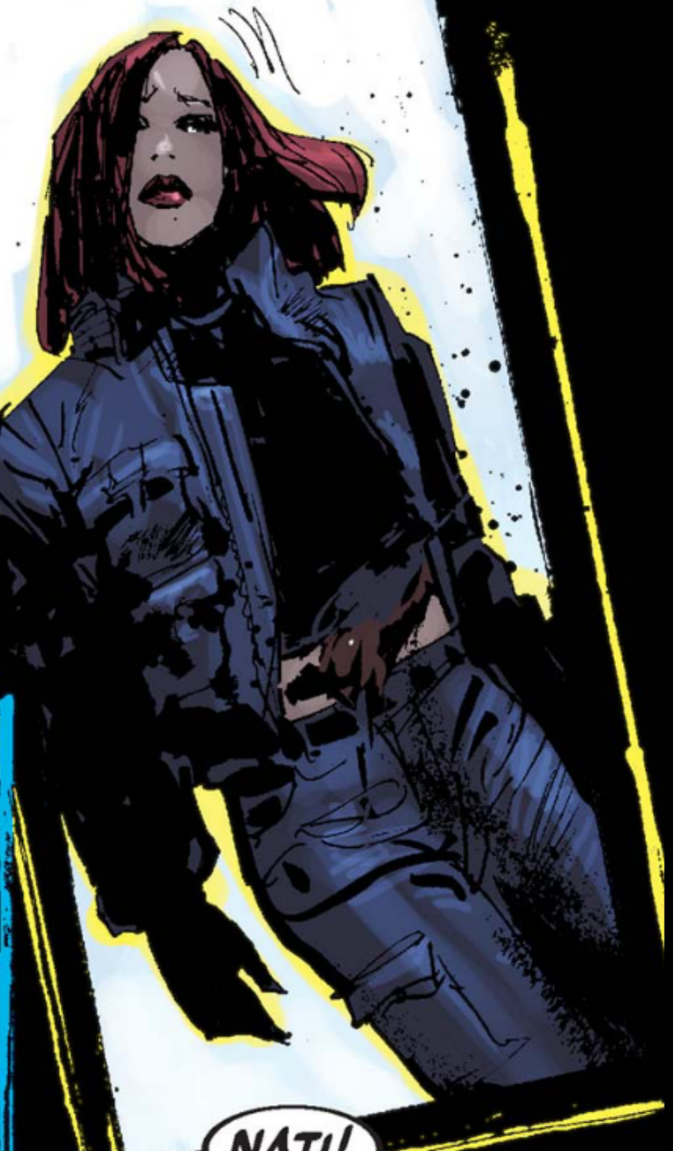
BUT SOMETIMES--

--YOU REALLY DON'T HAVE A *CHOICE.*

THINK... WE'D BETTER GET...OUT OF HERE. YOU OKAY?

NAT?




NAT!!

TO BE CONTINUED...